



Creating a Wildlife Habitat Oasis

Landowner Restores Property Through a Wetland Reserve Easement

Above: Landowner TJ Rogers (left), with NRCS District Conservationist Caleb Zahn (right), overlooking a scrape on the Wetland Reserve Easement site in Green Lake County.

Sandhill Cranes fly in, landing near the wetland scrape to feed and rest on TJ Rogers easement acreage. They disappear into the planted food plots as the sound of songbirds singing overwhelms the ears. The Wetland Reserve Easement, installed through a partnership with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is an oasis for birds, pollinators and other wildlife to feed, nest and rest.

TJ Rogers purchased 60 acres in Green Lake County, Wisconsin, with the hope of restoring the land to its natural beauty by creating habitat and attracting wildlife. His grandfather and father were foresters, so as a child, TJ was always out in the woods, building and growing his conservation land ethic from the ground up.

TJ and his father rented out some acres as cropland and some acres were enrolled in the Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program. Each year, the cropland renters couldn't get into the soybean fields and the corn didn't grow well due to excess moisture and flooding. Once Rogers acquired the land and started actively managing it, he realized it didn't make sense to keep trying to farm it. "Farmers didn't want to farm the property because of all the moisture, and it didn't produce good yields. When the rest of the land came out of the CRP, I wanted to find a more permanent solution; I heard about NRCS Wetland Reserve Easements through a friend and contacted the local USDA Service Center to find out more," said Rogers.

TJ talked with Caleb Zahn, NRCS District Conservationist, and Brian Kind, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician, about the program. Rogers learned details about the program and saw value in putting the land back to its original purpose as a wetland, before tile was installed and the area was unsuccessfully farmed. "TJ Rogers' goals for his property aligned with NRCS goals for a successful wetland easement restoration," explained Zahn. "I knew this program would be just right for my land to

accomplish my wildlife habitat goals," added Rogers. Once TJ heard about the program details, he saw value in putting the land back into wetlands. "This land flows into the Puchyan River, which is the outlet for Green Lake, which meets the Fox River and eventually Green Bay. This land is vital in helping prevent runoff. We have had a lot of excess water and runoff this year, including fast snowmelt. This easement establishment will be a great help in holding that excess water in the area," explained Zahn.

The easement consists of five wetland scrapes, totaling 2.2 acres. Tile breaks were also completed based on a topography survey. "We surveyed the land topography as a whole to plan the project, completed tile investigations and broke tile, deciphering the best locations for scrapes in low areas and designed them," explained Kind. Once the design phase was complete, construction started. Construction on this project took two seasons because the ground needed to be frozen enough to dig the scrapes around four feet deep. "Once the scrapes were constructed it took around three weeks for them to fill completely with water and they have been full ever since; a great location for holding excess water," added Kind.

Along with the wetland scrapes, over 39 acres of native pollinator seed mix were planted, including species like Yellow Coneflower, Bergamot, Big Bluestem and Black-eyed Susan. NRCS recommended a diverse species mix of four grasses, and thirteen forbs/legumes. "Six mowings were also built into the easement contract to maintain the planted areas; TJ has done a great job in maintaining the easement and he is also working to alleviate invasive species, like Wild parsnip, on the property," explained Kind. "We cut the pollinator habitat three times the first year, two times last year, and this year, we plan to cut it three more times," added Rogers. Mowing in the first year before seed development is necessary to prevent weed and



Left: Caleb and TJ view a wetland scrape on the property.



Right: TJ and Caleb inspect native pollinator species.

Below: (Top to Bottom) Birds nest on the easement. Pollinator habitat thrives during the summer season. Easement food plot residue (turnips) in the spring.

invasive species establishment. Mowing the pollinator habitat also establishes new growth. “We are glad to have those areas seeded down now to prevent runoff, whereas before, they were so wet, we couldn’t plant or farm them well,” explained Rogers.

Rogers also worked with NRCS through the Wetland Reserve Easement contract to add three food plots on almost three acres, creating opportunities for more wildlife. “We planted turnips and some other species to bring wildlife in,” explained Rogers. “Food plots are common practices on easements; they can be up to five percent of the easement not to exceed five acres,” explained Zahn. Rogers also worked with NRCS to add trails on the property to monitor the scrape ponds as part of the easement contract.

Rogers has seen the wildlife increase in the past three years since installation. “There were always geese flying over and now they are landing out here and actually have a place to feed and rest. There are so many more ducks than there have ever been, deer and turkey too,” added Rogers. TJ comments further, “what’s so cool about this whole project is how quickly it changed the landscape out here and how many more birds, ducks, song birds, pollinators and other wildlife and beneficial insects are around. It’s just amazing and rewarding to see.” Rogers allowed a conservation partner to complete a multi-year butterfly study on the property. The study observers found more species this year than they have ever before; proof of success is in the increase of wildlife and pollinators present on the property.

“NRCS easements are a great solution for marginal cropland that was originally wetland,” said Rogers. “Now we’ve restored the acreage to its original beauty and created great habitat for wildlife.” NRCS offers voluntary easement programs to

landowners who want to maintain or enhance their land in a way beneficial to agriculture and the environment. “We navigated the process together. Everyone at NRCS was great to work with; it was helpful to have office staff to explain things. The process was a real learning opportunity and NRCS staff are certainly experts in this field. Understanding the ecology and biology of the project and why they do certain things was eye opening and a great opportunity for me,” explained Rogers.

NRCS and TJ are very pleased with the conservation outcome. “TJ has been really great to work with; he sees the benefit for wildlife out there and the value of the wetland restoration, as far as keeping sediment out of the streams that leads to the rivers. He has even offered anyone interested in enrolling in the program, he would be glad to show them results and explain the process because he’s so happy with it,” explained Kind.

“If I could find a way to do this again I would do it in a heartbeat. My advice for potential landowners looking to enroll their land into an easement with NRCS would be to have an open mind, be patient and to enjoy the process. The process from the start was give and take. It really worked out great for us and the environment,” explained Rogers. “Conservation, in situations like this, where the land is better served as what it originally was, a wetland, those are the things that are important to me. If you have the ability to create something to help our natural resources and wildlife, you should do it for the betterment of our environment. If everyone does a little something, it certainly helps overall.”



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